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Voice of Conscience as Divine Say: Moral Predicament in Premchand's The Holy Panchayat

Abstract: The research article titled Voice of Conscience as Divine Say: Moral Predicament in Premchand's The Holy Panchayat proposes to bring to the fore the dynamic craft of Premchand's creative oeuvre that shares humanism in the context of thorough social predicaments. Life runs not merely on the ideas of selfish motivation, rather it has psychosocial dynamics. The poverty stricken society of Premchand is not devoid of humane tendencies. The characters in Premchand's writings portray a vision of life based on the voice of atman. That personal ambitions and grudges hold no value when tested on the measures of conscience forms the central thesis of this article that envisions the seat of a judge akin to the Divine seat.

Key words: claustrophobic, tradition, conscience

“Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,

And thus the native hue of resolution

Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,”

---William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 3, scene 1

Premchand has been an enigmatic presence in the reign of literatures written across the world. His genius that marks his sense of empathy for the society, particularly its most native inhabitants, is incomparable. The world view that Munshi Premchand creates is pivotal to the human existence. A man's quest for becoming humane against numerous odds is nothing but a common predicament of the existence itself. Even a casual reading of Premchand makes a person think of the deeper levels of consciousness and sensibility that gave birth to a Gobar, a Dhania, a Gheesu, a Madhava, a Dr Chadha and a seemingly pathetically divine old Kaki.

An important figure in Urdu and Hindi fiction, Premchand (1880-1936) always stood his head against the apparently decent morale of the society. The calamity and the torture that the poor and the downtrodden were made to suffer through the hands of the so called patrons of society were claustrophobic and tradition bound. He longed for a social system that could imbibe the personal sense of justice rather than the ways that lead to economical and emotional bankruptcy. The peculiarity of Premchand lies in his outlook and approach with which he viewed the situations. His is a canvas of rural world with its awkward limitations and its set paradigms from which it was tough to escape.

Inner voice or conscience can be depicted as the voice of the Divine. It takes its air not from what seems right but what is morally upright. A person can dare cheat others but seldom his sense of self. What a heart says at the moment of utter emotional crisis is the voice of Dharma. For Premchand the definition of Dharma has humanistic connotations.

See this dialogue between Algu and Khala,

“I'll come along, but I won't open my mouth during the panchayat.”

‘But why?’ she asked.

‘What answer can I give to this? It's my wish. Jumman is an old friend of mine and I can't afford to spoil my relationship with him.’

‘Will you turn your back to justice for fear of ruining your friendship?’

We have a tendency not to bother about our religious traditions; we would even let them be destroyed. But we are always aroused when a challenge is thrown at our faces. Algu had no reply to her question, but her words kept resounding in his mind--- will you turn your back to justice for fear of ruining your friendship?”(57-58)

Dharma is not that pertains to religion or that divides the blood of one from another, rather a way of thought that bears in itself a glue to unite all despite cultural and economical diversities.

The economical politics or the poetics of economics is central to Premchand’s ‘The Holy Panchayat’. Jumman who held a very nice approach towards his khala, turns caustic and rude towards her when gets her land, showing utter ingratitude of a greedy person who can go to any extent, “God knows how long the old woman will live! She imagines that by giving us three bighas of land, she has bought us! She is unable to chew her roti unless there is ghee in her dal! With the amount of money spent on feeding her, we could have bought the whole village.”(56) This vision of how economics has deep bearing on social affairs is apparent in the relationship between Jumman and Algu Chowdhary. The intimacy of hearts gets thwarted when Algu gives decision against Jumman Chowdhary in a panchayat invoked by Khala of Jumman to which Algu presides over. Premchand gives it a revealing note through the mouth of Algu, “Friendship is all very well, but it must be kept in its proper place. Man’s primary duty is to be just and true. It is the righteous who support the world. Otherwise it would have perished long ago.” (60) And ultimately, the hearts of the close friends get broken, “This decision shook the foundations of the friendship between Algu and Jumman. Now they were not seen talking with each other. Their old friendship which had stood firm like a tree could not withstand the first blast of truth. Truly, that tree had been planted in sand. Now when they met, they were formal with each other. They greeted each other coldly

as a sword greets a shield.”(60) Jumman develops grudge in his heart against his once most bosom friend. However to justify the action and decision of Algu, Premchand brings about a similar situation in which Jumman becomes the Panch in the very dispute between Samjhu Sahu and Algu. Jumman’s sense of responsibility and his moral sense of duty come to the fore when he finds himself in the very position of a jury. His personal sense of anguish and resent gets dispelled the same moment. Premchand writes adequately, “As soon as Jumman Sheikh was appointed sarpanch, he felt a similar sense of responsibility for his high position. He thought,’ I am sitting on the highest throne of justice and dharma. Whatever comes from my lips will be treated with the same respect as the words of God. I must not stray even an inch from the truth.’(64) Premchand has brilliantly put this feeling as follows, “After a little while, Jumman came to Algu and embraced him. Said he,‘My brother! Ever since you became sarpanch and decided the case against me, I have been your deadly enemy. But today I learnt as a panch that I am neither anybody’s friend nor anybody’s foe. A panch cannot see anything except justice. Today I am convinced that God speaks through a panch’s lips.’

Algu began to cry. His tears washed away the misunderstandings that had accumulated in their hearts.”(64-65) It is well said that “the knowledge of one’s responsibility helps to improve our relationship with others. Whenever we behave badly, this inner realization helps to bring us back to the right path.”(63)

Through this story, in fine, Premchand brings to the fore the highest version of Dharma that listens to the voice of conscience. The opinion of Dr. Vidya Niwas Mishra who writes in his essay titled “Literature and Its Cultural Concerns: Some Impressions from Modern Hindi” is worthy of note herein,

“Talking of concern, I am reminded of a verse addressed to the Buddha by a Sanskrit poet Matrceta. I give here an English rendering of the same :(italics mine)

‘It’s this steady compassion that backs you in hundreds of pieces. And casts you always like an offering for the good of others. And yet you must want that; it must be the work of your will. For though it causes you grief, it does not disturb you.”(Mishra 311)

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